DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 418 491 EA 028 992

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| AUTHOR | Stumpo, Vincent M. |
| TITLE | The Accountable Curriculum: A Merit-Based High School Diploma Program. |
| INSTITUTION | National Association of Secondary School Principals, Reston, VA. |
| ISSN | ISSN-0547-4205 |
| PUB DATE | 1997-11-00 |
| NOTE | 6p. |
| AVAILABLE FROM | National Association of Secondary School Principals, 1904 Association Drive, Reston, VA 20191-1537 (members: $2; nonmembers: $3; quantity discounts). |
| PUB TYPE | Collected Works - Serials (022) -- Reports - Descriptive (141) |
| JOURNAL CIT | Curriculum Report; v27 n2 Nov 1997 |
| EDRS PRICE | EDRS Price MF01 Plus Postage. PC Not Available from EDRS. |
| DESCRIPTORS | Academic Standards; *Accountability; Curriculum Design; Degree Requirements; Educational Innovation; Educational Objectives; *Graduation Requirements; High Schools; *National Competency Tests; National Norms |

ABSTRACT

Recent research on student achievement conducted by the National Assessment for Educational Progress (NAEP) indicates that American students are deficient in reading, mathematics, writing, and other skills. To reverse this trend, the Accountable Curriculum, a program that raises expectations for students was created. The program is a departure from the widespread attitude that secondary school graduation is a birthright. The Accountability Curriculum offers a certification program that is fair--all students are judged by the same standards on national examinations--and is flexible since students will have options in diploma type and course selections. Students will have to pass national tests in 40 percent to 75 percent of the courses that comprise their high school career, and students will have the opportunity for a second-chance fifth year. The minimum student proficiency scores on the national exams will begin low and then gradually be raised to acceptable values. The text focuses on the fundamental components of the curriculum; the effects on instructor input; steps for putting the plan into action, along with course requirements; expectations in subject comprehension; the 4-year and 5-year graduation options; and the problems created by the current system. (RJM)

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ED 418 491

nassp
CURRICULUM REPORT
Vol. 27, No. 2 November 1997 (ISSN 0547-4205)

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# The Accountable Curriculum: A Merit-Based High School Diploma Program

"Success is not always a sure sign of merit..."–***Josh Billings***

Recent research on student achievement conducted by the National Assessment for Educational Progress (NAEP) indicates that approximately five-sixths of our youngsters are inadequate writers, two-thirds are deficient readers, and nearly one-half lack basic mathematical competence. Proficiency studies in science, history, civics, and geography have reported equally dismal results. Sadly, it is becoming ever more apparent that a diploma from an American high school is more of a testimony to attendance than achievement.

Since the mid-1970s, secondary school graduation rates have hovered near 90 percent, as few students have failed to complete the twelfth grade because of an inability to attain minimum academic standards. Instead, those that do not graduate often choose to drop out of school voluntarily. The reality is that the granting of a diploma has been, and remains, all but automatic to any student willing to "stay the course." Unfortunately, the aforementioned research indicates that the bestowing of such a document is not a certification of intellectual skills. Rather, the lofty graduation rates in the United States can only be juxtaposed with the inferior academic achievement record of our students by concluding that most schools set classroom standards at levels low enough to ensure that almost any student making the slightest effort will complete secondary school, thereby rendering the high school diploma all but meaningless. A novel, national curricular scheme for secondary schools that will impose high, objective, and uniform academic standards on students, teachers, and schools, while establishing a student assessment system of greater accuracy and responsibility, is needed.

## The Accountable Curriculum

The Accountable Curriculum is founded on the belief that students will respond to a heightened level of educational expectation. Emphasizing intellectual rigor, this program will provide students with equal opportunity for academic mastery. It will not, however, guarantee equal performance outcome. It will offer students reasonable options and expedient remediation concerning their programs of study, while providing for an academic quality control mechanism currently lacking in our schools. Summarily, the Accountable Curriculum will ensure that the diploma will be indicative of quantifiable merit and achievement.

### Fundamental Components

The fundamental components of the Accountable Curriculum are as follows:

- **Document Receipt.** Depending on the program completed and the mastery demonstrated, each student will receive one of the following four documents: Honors Diploma; Academic Diploma; Standard Diploma; or Certificate of Attendance.
- **Yearlong Academic Courses.** To qualify for graduation, each student will be required to pass (as assessed by his or her classroom instructors) a minimum number of yearlong core academic courses in one of three different diploma options as follows:

| Standard Program | Academic Program | Honors Program |
|---|---|---|
| 1 Computer Science | 1 Computer Science | 1 Computer Science |
| 4 English | 4 English | 4 English |
| 2 Foreign Language | 2 Foreign Language | 3 Foreign Language |
| 3 Mathematics | 3 Mathematics | 3 Mathematics |
| 2 Science | 3 Science | 4 Science |
| 2 Social Studies | 3 Social Studies | 3 Social Studies |
| **14 core courses** | **16 core courses** | **18 core courses** |

- **National Assessment Program.** A national assessment program will be employed to ensure student proficiency. This accountability measure will require no additional testing. Specifically, yearly final examinations are staples of

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student evaluation. I merely propose that such concluding annual tests not be written by individual teachers, departments, schools, districts, or states. Instead, a comprehensive and uniform national subject-specific test will be employed as the final annual examination in each academic course. (These examinations will not be minimum competency tests, but rather assessments of significant intellectual achievement.) A program of annual objective tests has numerous advantages:

- Such examinations will be composed by national committees of subject matter experts. This will address the current crisis of grade inflation generated by classroom tests that are often authored by instructors who may or may not be well qualified, but who are certainly subjected to local pressures for high marks from parents and students.
- The feedback received from these assessments will be course-specific and timely, allowing students to immediately repeat classes and national exams on which they performed poorly, and educators to rapidly execute appropriate alterations in pedagogy.
- All students will be judged by the same performance standards as tests and minimum passing scores will be uniform throughout the nation.
- National examinations can be modeled after the highly successful SAT II: Subject Tests or other similar objective subject matter examinations. (The College Board currently assesses student achievement in approximately 20 different disciplines ranging from literature to physics.) In many content areas the existing SAT II tests will serve nicely. In other subjects, similar examinations can be created easily.

- **National Examinations.** In addition to successfully completing a minimum number of core academic courses, each student will be required to pass a minimum number of corresponding national examinations. That is, to earn a Standard, Academic, or Honors Diploma, a student must pass at least 10, 14, or 18 standardized tests, respectively.
- **Core Curriculum Requirements.** In passing the 10 national examinations required to obtain the Standard Diploma, at least 1 examination must be in each of the areas of English, Foreign Language, Mathematics, Science, and Social Studies. In passing the 14 or 18 examinations necessary to merit the Academic or Honors Diploma, respectively, at least 2 tests must be in each of the aforementioned major disciplines.

### Instructor Input

The standardized examination program will in no manner restrict the creativity of the instructor. The instructor will remain at liberty to design and utilize whatever techniques and strategies are necessary to achieve student mastery. The purpose of national examinations is not to limit the means of the instructor, but rather to accurately assess their *ends*.

## Putting the Plan into Action

Let us consider how such an accountability plan might work. To begin, consider the following list of 30 yearlong academic courses (though not necessarily complete, it will be sufficient to serve this illustration):

| English | Mathematics | Science |
|---|---|---|
| Composition | Algebra I | Physical Science |
| Critical Reading | Geometry | Biology |
| American Literature | Algebra II/ Trig. | Chemistry |
| British Literature | Calculus | Physics |
| World Literature | Computer Science | Earth/Space Science |
| Shakespeare | | Psychology |

| Social Studies | Foreign Languages | Arts |
|---|---|---|
| American History | Level I (Vocabulary) | Music Theory |
| European History | Level II (Grammar) | Visual Arts |
| World History | Level III (Composition) | Art History |
| American Government | Level IV (Literature) | |
| Geography | | |
| Economics | | |

### Requirement 1

A student must successfully complete 14, 16, or 18 of the yearlong core academic courses to satisfy the first condition for earning a Standard, Academic, or Honors Diploma, respectively.

A typical program of study for a student pursuing an Academic Diploma might be:

| 9th Grade | 10th Grade | 11th Grade | 12th Grade |
|---|---|---|---|
| Critical Reading | Composition | American Lit. | British Lit. |
| Algebra I | Geometry | Algebra II /Trig. | Computer Sci. |
| Physical Sci. | Chemistry | Biology | * Physics |
| American Hist. | European Hist. | American Gov. | * World History |
| Foreign Lang. I | Foreign Lang. II | * Foreign Lang. III | * Foreign Lang. IV |
| * Music Theory | * Visual Arts | * Geography | * Economics |

Sixteen classes satisfy graduation requirements for the Academic Diploma; the 8 classes with asterisks have been selected as the student's electives. This 24-course curriculum is academically rigorous. Even the eight electives are intellectually challenging, as should be the case for any student seeking an Academic or Honors Diploma and planning on college-level study. However, for students less interested in purely academic pursuits, the Standard Diploma option requires only 14 academic classes and offers 10 electives to complete the curriculum. Electives need not be traditional classes; they may be courses

that offer students the opportunity to explore other areas (e.g., vocational courses). In any case, this new program does require that all students demonstrate quantifiable proficiency in a core set of academic skills, but also provides a mechanism to develop other talents and interests.

### Requirement 2

The student pursuing an Academic Diploma must also satisfy the graduation condition of surpassing a pre-established minimum score on 14 national subject-specific tests in the traditional academic courses. Two successful examinations must be completed in each of the five major disciplines. For example, let us suppose that in a four-year period the student takes 24 culminating national examinations, one in each class, with the following results:

- **National Tests Passed:** Algebra I, Geometry, Algebra II / Trig., Computer Science, American History, American Government, Foreign Language I and II, Critical Reading, Composition, American Literature, Physical Science, Biology, and Music Theory.
- **National Tests Failed:** European History, Economics, World History, Foreign Language III and IV, British Literature, Chemistry, Physics, Visual Arts, and Geography.

In this case, the student has successfully satisfied the second graduation requirement at the Academic Diploma level by passing 14 national examinations with at least 2 in each of the five major topic areas. (It should be noted that the student in this illustration has a schedule that contains 24 traditional courses.) However, what if the student assembled a schedule in which the eight electives were split between academic and non-academic courses? For example, if the student decided to utilize four electives for vocational classes such as wood shop, home economics, ceramics, and driver's education, would that reduce the required number of national examinations that must be passed in order to receive an Academic Diploma? The answer is no. If a student opts to use the allowable electives for non-academic courses, that is his or her prerogative. However, regardless of the electives selected, 10, 14, or 18 national examinations in traditional academic courses must be passed in order to receive the Standard, Academic, or Honors Diploma, respectively.

## Subject Comprehension

To determine minimum subject matter mastery, I suggest employing a system of national examinations written at the same level of complexity as the present SAT IIs—which are scored on a 200 to 800 proficiency scale. Minimum passing marks will differ depending on the diploma type sought, but generally will be set lower in the initial years of the program and gradually increased over time as students, parents, faculty, and schools become acclimated to the academic rigor, the testing procedures, and the ramifications of exam scores. I envision that it will take a decade before standards can be set at appropriate levels. Suggested escalating scales are as follows:

| Academic Year | Minimum Required Proficiency Score (200-800 scale) | | |
|---|---|---|---|
| | Standard Diploma | Academic Diploma | Honors Diploma |
| 2000 | 350 | 400 | 500 |
| 2002 | 370 | 420 | 520 |
| 2004 | 410 | 460 | 540 |
| 2006 | 450 | 500 | 560 |
| 2008 | 490 | 540 | 580 |
| 2010- ? | 500 | 550 | 600 |

Anticipating that many students would currently perform poorly on comprehensive tests, I suggest setting the initial minimum passing score for the Standard Diploma option at 350, before raising the proficiency requirements in subsequent years. However, even this low standard does not guarantee that all students will be successful on their first attempt at each test. (In 1995, approximately 3 percent of all students who took the SAT IIs did not exceed a 350 score.) Currently, students who take SAT II examinations do so voluntarily. It is logical to assume that students who are weak in a given subject area are not currently being assessed in that discipline. Consequently, if national testing is instituted along the lines suggested, the percentage of students scoring below 350 would most likely rise, requiring some students to repeat classes or remain for a fifth year of secondary school to earn their diplomas. Even then, there are no guarantees. Educators and parents must be prepared to react to this unpleasant inevitability by strengthening the personal readiness and academic preparation of our students and not by opting to reduce national examination standards or to abandon the idea of national testing altogether.

## Graduation Options

### Four-Year Options

What will happen if a student finishes four years of secondary school, completes the required number of academic classes, but fails to pass the necessary number of national examinations? At that point, the student and his family have two options. First, they can accept a lower ranking graduation designation. For instance, if the student has mastered (at the Honors level) 16 but not 18 national tests, he or she would be entitled to receive an Academic Diploma, but not an Honors Diploma. If the student has demonstrated adequate proficiency (at the Academic level) on 12 but not 14 comprehensive exams, he or she could be granted a Standard Diploma, but not an Academic Diploma. Finally, if the student has not demonstrated the necessary achievement on at least 10 national examinations, he or she could be awarded only a Certificate of Attendance. This last document would simply affirm attendance without acknowledging adequate academic achievement. Accepting any graduation document would effectively bring to a close the student's secondary school career. However, another option is available.

### Fifth-Year Option

Believing that everyone deserves a second chance and acknowledging that some students learn at slower rates, any student who failed to achieve his initially targeted diploma type would be allowed to return for a fifth year to retake classes in which he or she scored poorly on previous national exams or to attempt other academic courses. Any national exams passed by the student during this fifth year would be added to his or her previous total. At the conclusion of this extra year, however, the student must accept the highest graduating document earned. Regardless of outcome, the fifth year, if necessary and desired, will terminate the secondary school experience for each student.

## Problems Created By/Within the Current System

I am quite concerned about our willingness to undertake this transformation in conviction. As standardized testing has increased in our schools, so too have the objections. Faced with poor student assessments, educators have frequently labeled such exams as ineffective or biased. In responding in this fashion, they have chosen to attack the messenger, rather than address the veracities of the message. The reality is that although no testing instrument is without shortcomings, current objective assessment programs are collectively presenting a looking glass into which many educators refuse to glance. Despite the protests, the tests are not to blame. We are. As a society, we have failed to create homes and schools that foster the intellectual development of our children. The time has arrived to confront this sobering truth and to pursue aggressive action.

## Summary and Conclusion

The Accountable Curriculum program is a departure from our present attitude and policies toward the high school diploma. Unlike the populations of other advanced nations, Americans tend to view secondary school graduation as a birthright, a mistaken embrace of equality over merit. Paradoxically, this belief is indicative of how little we actually respect what the diploma symbolizes. This certificate embodies so little prestige and value in our society that denying it to any student would be considered the greatest of insults. Consequently, it is not uncommon for educators and parents to oppose any proposal that significantly increases academic standards and classroom accountability once they are confronted with the reality that some students might fail. Many believe that awarding high school diplomas based on quantifiable intellectual proficiency would be unfair and cruel to those students who could not make the grade. This misplaced compassion has contributed to a secondary school system characterized by impressive graduation rates but devoid of intellectual accomplishment.

The proposed Accountable Curriculum offers a secondary certification program that is fair, in that all students will be judged by the same standards on national examinations; moderate, in that students will have to pass national tests in only 40 to 75 percent (10–18 of 24 classes) of the courses that comprise their high school career; flexible, in that students will have options in diploma type and course selections; compassionate, in that it will offer students the opportunity for a second chance fifth year; patient, in that the minimum student proficiency scores on the national exams will begin low and will be gradually increased to acceptable values; and accountable, in that students, teachers, and schools will have to demonstrate measurable academic achievement.

Future generations of children lie at risk while we struggle to ascertain whether we have the conviction to undertake such a bold new path to propel young people to the fullness of their potential or whether we will accept the status quo, thereby allowing the long and undistinguished line of high school graduates to propagate into the limitless future as we complacently shake our heads in silent disbelief at the next research study to document the continued decline of American society.

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*Curriculum Report* is a bi-monthly publication of the National Association of Secondary School Principals, 1904 Association Dr., Reston, Va. 20191-1537. Telephone **(703) 860-0200**; fax **(703) 476-5432**; World Wide Web **http://www.nassp.org**. NASSP dues include the annual subscription rate of $4; individual subscriptions not available. Single copies are $2 each ($3 for nonmembers), 2-10 copies of the same issue are $1.75 each ($2.75 for nonmembers), 11-99 copies are $1.25 each ($2.25 for nonmembers), and 100 or more copies are $1.15 each ($2.15 for nonmembers). Payment must accompany orders of $15 or less.

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